

# THE EUGENICS REVIEW

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**"Eugenics is the science which deals with all influences that improve the inborn qualities of a race; also with those that develop them to the utmost advantage."**

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## NOTES OF THE QUARTER

THE full text of the *Eugenics Society's* Memorandum of evidence to the Royal Commission on Population is published in this issue on page 92. It opens with a brief historical statement and proceeds immediately to a refutation of certain widely held misconceptions as to the meaning and purposes of eugenics. This is as it should be. Eugenics is a developing concept which can best be understood in evolutionary terms. Although it means to us of this generation fundamentally what it meant to Galton when he first used and defined the term over sixty years ago, the emphasis is not in all respects the same. True, the ideal remains unchanged—to improve the inborn qualities of mankind and, a most important and too often forgotten correlative, to develop them to the utmost advantage; but the theory and practice have evolved, the former with advancing knowledge of genetics and with deepening understanding of the genetically-selective factors in man's environment, the latter, partly in consequence of changes in theory, but also largely in response to the transformation that has occurred in the

demographic, political and economic structure of our society.

Unfortunately, these progressive modifications in the scientific basis of eugenics and in policies devised for the realization of eugenic aims have been accompanied by what in the Memorandum are described as perversions of eugenics, by racial theories and by authoritarian practices for the control of human fertility which have arrogated to themselves the name eugenics and become regarded as its true progeny. The *Eugenics Society* has thus had to contend with two separate difficulties; for not only has it had to make periodic restatements of eugenic principles and policies, at the same time patiently explaining to critics that *these* are its views and not those which served well enough in the light of the knowledge and within the social setting of the day before yesterday, but it has also had to defend itself against attacks which, while perfectly just in themselves, should properly have been directed elsewhere.

It is worth repeating that none of these restatements, published at irregular intervals under the title *Aims and Objects of the Eugenics Society*, has involved any drastic departure from its predecessors. Through all the modifications in matters of detail, what is most striking is the essential continuity of eugenic thought since the publication of Galton's *Inquiries into Human Faculty* in 1883. Indeed, so far ahead was Galton of his own time, that many of his observations on eugenics could pass for those of a modern liberal mind. Here, for instance, is a characteristic quotation from his *Hereditary Genius: an Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences*, first published in 1869, and revised in 1892:

The best form of civilization in respect to the improvement of the race, would be one in which society was not costly;

where incomes were chiefly derived from professional sources, and not much through inheritance; where every lad had a chance of showing his abilities and, if highly gifted, was enabled to achieve a first-class education and entrance into professional life, by the liberal help of the exhibitions and scholarships which he had gained in his early youth; where marriage was held in as high honour as in ancient Jewish times; where the pride of race was encouraged (of course I do not refer to the nonsensical sentiment of the present day, that goes under that name); where the weak could find a welcome and a refuge in celibate monasteries or sisterhoods, and lastly, where the better sort of emigrants and refugees from other lands were invited and welcomed, and their descendants naturalized.

The matter might perhaps be put differently in a contemporary statement of eugenic aims; but could it be put better? or is there even to-day a better ideal worth striving after?

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The development of perversions of eugenics is not in itself very surprising. Class and race prejudices find an easy and agreeable justification in doctrines of class and racial superiority. By a familiar mechanism aggressive impulses, which as such would be denied admission to consciousness, have all too often been transmuted into moral drives with the lofty purpose of suppressing or even annihilating "inferior" peoples. These abnormal psychological manifestations are well understood and there are obvious reasons for their prevalence in our troubled times. But what is surprising is the persistence with which these perversions are represented, by writers who should know better, as the essence of eugenics itself. Dr. Ashley Montagu, for instance, in the book briefly noticed in our April issue (p. 8),\* referring to the teaching of mythological racial doctrines and the practice of race hygiene in Germany, says that "such

activities, among others, have caused eugenics to fall into disrepute among scientific students of genetics, the science of heredity upon which eugenics is alleged to be based." The statement is true as far as it goes. These activities *have* caused eugenics to fall into disrepute—but with exactly as much justification as they have caused Dr. Ashley Montagu's own science, anthropology, to fall into disrepute too. Some eminent anthropologists, Sir Arthur Keith for instance, who once said of race prejudice that it "works for the ultimate good of mankind and must be given a recognized place in all our efforts to obtain natural justice in the world,"\* have advocated theories not easily distinguishable from those upheld by exponents of race hygiene in Hitler's Germany; nevertheless, we can be reasonably sure that anthropology still holds its honoured place in Dr. Ashley Montagu's esteem, and that, if it has anywhere fallen into disrepute, it has not been among scientific students of the subject.

Like many critics of eugenics Dr. Ashley Montagu also has grave doubts as to the value of sterilization as a means of eliminating mental defect, but seems hardly aware that these doubts are shared and expressed by eugenists themselves.

Were every feeble-minded individual to be sterilized, he writes, for the next two thousand years, the reduction of feeble-minded individuals in the population at the end of that time would not exceed 50 per cent. It is a very long time to have to wait for such a return. Superior additional methods are available, but they are not among those which appeal to the eugenists, who fail to understand that eugenics should be a social science and not a biological one.

The first part of this quotation may be compared with the following from the *Eugenics Society's* statement of *Aims and Objects*.

Just as positive eugenics aims at encouraging breeding among the fit, so negative eugenics aims at reducing the

\* *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, 1942.

\* *The Place of Prejudice in Modern Civilization*, 1931.

numbers of the unfit. This is far more difficult than is generally realized. Even if pursued with great vigour, a negative eugenics policy can only yield results very gradually and never with complete success.

For these limitations there are three main reasons. The first is that many apparently healthy persons are "carriers" of hereditary defects; that is to say, they are liable to transmit to posterity defects from which they do not suffer themselves. Our present methods for detecting such carriers are laborious, incomplete and unreliable; and until better methods are discovered carriers will continue to transmit defects, however effectively negative eugenics may be applied to persons known to suffer from them.

The second reason is that new hereditary defects, known as mutants, sometimes appear in families which, as far as is known, have never shown them before.

And thirdly, the practice of negative as of positive eugenics can only be fully effective if the persons most closely concerned have a responsible attitude towards parenthood. Such an attitude is usual in persons with bodily defects but is not often present in persons afflicted in the mind. Nor is it found in the large class of mentally subnormal persons who are without ordinary prudence and foresight. Nevertheless, many persons with mild degrees of mental defect are well aware that they would not make good parents and regard their fertility as a burden of which they would gladly be rid.

It is right to point out these limitations on negative eugenics, but equally it is right to stress that it is better to eliminate defects, however gradually, than to let them multiply for lack of forethought and effort.

The only thing that need be added is that it would be easy, without resort to argument but merely by further quotations from *Aims and Objects*, to correct every single misstatement about eugenics that appears in Dr. Ashley Montagu's book. But it is not our purpose to set about an author with

whose objectives we are in general agreement and whose argument seems to us in the main soundly based. His book merely serves as a convenient illustration of the urgent need referred to in the Memorandum "to rehabilitate the word eugenics"—in brief, to ensure that it should mean to the general public, and even in time to scientific writers, exactly what it means to eugenists themselves.

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An important part of the Memorandum deals with standards of eugenic value. No one who has attempted to define such standards will under-rate the difficulties of the task. Is health the standard? If so, what place is there for men and women of genius but afflicted in body or mind? For John Keats or Fyodor Dostoevsky? Is it intelligence? There are few who would question this standard, but are there no exceptions, for instance, robust persons with manual skills but relatively low I.Q.'s? Is it social usefulness? How useful is the dreamer, the iconoclast or disturber of accepted social values? The Athenians of the Fourth Century settled the question in the case of Socrates, but was it in a manner that would be unreservedly approved to-day? And are there not conflicting views among Germans, and not only among them, as to the social usefulness of Adolf Hitler? Is it freedom from familial disease and defects? But some such genetic taints are not necessarily a serious handicap, as, for example, diabetes mellitus since the introduction of treatment by insulin. Is it, in the sense defined in the Memorandum, genophilia? It is worth remembering that among artists, scientists and saints, among men and women who have devoted their lives to the service of impersonal ends, this trait has seemed rather less conspicuous than among the generality of mankind.

And yet, when all reservations have been made, and there are a number in the Memorandum itself, can it be doubted that these qualities together characterize a type which by any reasonable standard must be regarded as eugenic? Sound physique and mental health, intelligence, high moral qualities,

freedom from transmissible defects, genophilia—whatever the special characters or talents of the individual, these are desirable attributes and their widest distribution must always be a primary eugenic objective.

Here again we may turn to the *Society's* statement of *Aims and Objects* :

Men and women of action and dreamers, the sociable and the solitary, those endowed with manual skill and intellectual, bold experimenters and those who move with caution, saints, artists, scientists—all these make their separate and indispensable contributions to human culture. Even if, in some distant future, mankind had the capacity—which it certainly has not now—to breed for any of these types to the exclusion of others, it may be hoped that it would know better than to use it. But every type should enjoy to the full, over and above its special endowments, those inborn qualities that are generally agreed to be desirable. To bring this about, within the framework of a free society, is the purpose of eugenics.

It follows that eugenic standards must not be too rigidly applied. Their chief value is that having, to quote the Memorandum, "as their confluent and resultant expression the couple who, in a community which provides good prospects for the future welfare of children, which encourages family life and inculcates a sense of its responsibilities, produce by intention and design a large family and provide for it a happy and a healthy home," they point the way clearly to a socially acceptable eugenic policy.

For such a policy a far wider basis is needed than the mere removal of social and economic deterrents to parenthood. The Memorandum suggests, as further measures for securing a eugenically favourable environment, "the inculcation of a eugenic conscience," "the establishment of facilities by which every engaged or married couple can obtain the most up-to-date scientific guidance on genetic problems," and "universal accessibility of knowledge as to how pregnancies can be regulated."

All these are of course interdependent.

The inculcation of a eugenic conscience will not produce large families among biologically well-endowed persons unless far more is done than at present to equalize the position between parents and childless couples. Nor, however, can economic and social measures be expected to have any great effect in the absence of a widespread desire for far larger families than are the rule at present. Again, as society becomes more eugenically minded, there will be a corresponding increase in the numbers of couples who, before marriage, will demand a skilled assessment of their genetical make-up; and who, having secured this knowledge, may need treatment for subfertility or alternatively instruction in contraception or even such facilities as were recommended in the Brock Report on sterilization.

Obviously the programme is a modest one. Other measures, involving more drastic changes in our social structure, have been suggested to the same end; but the Memorandum rightly confines itself to such measures as could be adopted here and now, within the context of our present social order. In so far as it calls for legislation it is a programme which could be carried with small opposition by any of our leading political parties. These parties, for all their differences in ultimate objectives, have already reached essential agreement on the immediate policies to be pursued with respect to family allowances, housing and education; and it is unlikely that they would disagree about the other changes (i.e. encouragement of early marriage and lessening the burdens of childbearing) proposed in the Memorandum. If the problem before us were simply the removal of certain social and economic deterrents to parenthood, we could look forward to an early solution with complete confidence.

The real difficulty arises in connection with that part of the programme that is beyond the scope of legislation. Governments can provide the setting within which a eugenic conscience could find expression; they can offer educational and other facilities for the inculcation of such a conscience; they can make available the instruments of

propaganda and pay the teachers; but where their function ends the real task of education begins. Such work as has been done by the *Eugenics Society*, in urging and fostering a sense of responsibility to posterity, in instructing the public in the realities and dangers of our present demographic situation, in correcting widespread errors about our population trend, in imparting the elements of genetics and creating a public opinion favourable to eugenically-planned parenthood—such educational work needs to be done on a vast scale and through every agency (e.g. school, Press, film, radio) that will serve the purpose. If the task is started now and pursued with a vigour commensurate with its urgency there will still be plenty left for posterity to do.

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For reasons of space we have had to confine these notes to only a few of the matters dealt with in this remarkable Memorandum. We could just as easily have picked

on other matters for comment—for instance, the illuminating discussion on parental instincts, or the section on negative eugenics, or the imaginative proposal for an Imperial Institute of Demographic Studies. But any such selection is bound in some sense to be misleading. The Memorandum forms a unity and must be taken as a whole. Like Dr. C. P. Blacker's Galton lecture, just published as a pamphlet under the title *Eugenics in Prospect and Retrospect*,\* it offers as complete a survey as could be hoped for of the outlook of present-day eugenics. Both the pamphlet and the Memorandum should be read together, by Fellows and Members of the *Society*, as the most up-to-date statements available of eugenic principles and practice, and by the general reader as authoritative introductions to demographic problems of great and growing importance.

\* Hamish Hamilton Medical Books. Price 1s. 6d. net. Copies may be obtained from the Secretary, *Eugenics Society*, 69 Eccleston Square, London, S.W.1.

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